



Retain or Perish: Why Recruiting Won't Save the CF

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The Canadian Forces is responding to the most critical personnel shortage of the post-war era with stop-gap recruiting measures and is failing to staunch the hemorrhaging of its highly-trained professionals. Although evidence of the crisis has been building for several years — ships unable to sail because of "critical manning" shortages, battalions being patched together with reserve force augmentees and pilots leaving in droves — never has the CF officially acknowledged that a Forces-wide problem existed. To the contrary, until just three years ago, the CF offered lucrative packages to leave the forces to those service professionals deemed redundant. To add insult to injury, the office in National Defence Headquarters that monitored CF personnel levels was disbanded just as the situation became critical. Today the situation is abysmal. Contrary to stated defence policy, which calls for manning levels of no less than 60,000 regulars, the Vice Chief of Defence Staff (VCDS), bowing to present realities, has now set it at 58,500. And even in the most wildly optimistic recruiting scenarios this number is projected to plummet by a further 7,900 service members before it recovers. All of this has inevitably contributed to serious reductions in operational capability. In recent months, 42 CF-18s have been grounded. The destroyer HMCS *Huron* is being permanently tied up and other ships experience chronic manning shortages.¹ Even at 'optimum' manning levels of 60,000 the CF had difficulty re-

acting to the variety of tasks to which it is committed. What will the situation be like now? And more importantly, what is the CF and government doing to reverse the trend?

While other militaries recognized and identified recruiting problems and their solutions, the CF is quickly plummeting past critical manning levels with no lifeline or credible plan to salvage the situation. From force levels of approximately 90,000 in 1992, the CF reduced its establishment levels to a Regular Force of 60,000 personnel. This target was reached in 1996 through a series of force reduction programs (FRP), reduced intake, and natural attrition. It has only recently come to light, however, that beyond paring down to a new target level, the CF has lost so many personnel that it now "faces a significant personnel shortfall".² In terms of absolute numbers, it means that the 60,000 personnel target level is understaffed by over 4,000 people today. These personnel deficits could climb as high as 9,400 by the end of the year.³ More significantly, this decline could result in a trained personnel level of only 43,000 within 24 months if trends continue.⁴ This will further exacerbate the pressure on serving personnel and the overall effectiveness of the CF in a number of ways.

Any reduction below this level, either in terms of viable units or in aggregate personnel levels, will severely hamper the CF's ability to carry out its government-directed tasks, let alone respond to unforeseen situations. In order to cope, units and commands within the CF have been forced to develop bad habits which further exacerbate the personnel crisis. Two of the

worst of these habits are the forming of *ad hoc* units and cannibalization — stealing people from one organization in order to meet the operational requirement of another. These practices and the overall reduced number of trained personnel place extra strain on personnel still serving. The CF acknowledges that 38 out of 107 Regular Force military occupations are 'stressed' or performing with less than an ideal number of personnel. In the army, this means that 8 of 15 trades are understaffed; in the navy it translates to 9 of 20.⁵ Reduced team cohesion and effectiveness, not to mention increased operational tempo for service members, are the pernicious consequences of being short-handed. Other consequences include reduced levels of collective and individual training, as more and more resources are diverted to filling in the holes caused by staffing shortages.

The CF has suddenly come to the realization that this deficit is now "one of the most serious challenges facing the CF". It states that "much study of the situation (how we got here and where we are) is complete, and actions required to ameliorate the situation are becoming clear."⁶ Accordingly, the CF has embarked upon a strategy to dramatically increase recruitment, hoping to enroll between 7,200 and 10,000 people a year for the next 3 to 4 years.⁷

Recruiting, however, is not sufficient to resolve the dire straits in which the CF finds itself. As the saying goes, the first step to getting out of a hole is to stop digging. Retention of trained men and women in the CF must become a real priority. A strategy that combines recruiting and retention is needed and needed now. The logic for such a strat-

egy is clear: recruiting alone is incapable of meeting the targets set for it; recruiting focuses on quantitative deficiencies, while retention emphasizes qualitative aspects as well. Using feedback from personnel who have taken their release from the CF, we shall examine the reasons why people are leaving. This will enable us to do two things: first, to cast doubt on the 'conventional wisdom' that is currently circulating in Ottawa as to what the causes of the large number of releases are; second, to determine what steps are required in order to design and implement a robust human resources strategy for the CF.

WHY RECRUITING ALONE WILL NOT WORK

Too much is expected of recruiting.

The targets set for the recruiting system in response to the current crisis are overly optimistic. Figure 1 shows that the recruiting goals of 7,200 and 9,400 would mean an increase in enrollment by a factor of three to four.⁸ In addition, this extraordinary effort would need to be sustained for 36-48 months in order to fully rectify the current deficit. Unfortunately, these figures represent enrollment, which means the numbers of people actually attracted would need to be much higher — between 14,000 and 37,600 depending on the actual enrollee target set.⁹ Finally, these enrollees must first become trainees, and begin the long road to becoming operationally ready soldiers, sailors, and aviators. With failure rates in basic training anywhere between 20-50%, and a minimum timeframe of 10 months before these recruits even join their units, the numbers of people attracted and enrolled would need to be much higher than the CF anticipates.

Year	Enrollees	Releases	Comments
92/93	1369	5713	- CF at 90,000 - reductions begin
93/94	1881	5852	
94/95	2109	7458	
95/96	1931	7690	
96/97	3085	5112	- CF at 60,000 - reductions end
97/98	2498	4079	
98/99	2601	3942	
99/00	2300	3600	

Figure 1: Annual Enrollments and Releases 1992-2000
(Source: CF Communication Strategy Document, 10 December 2000)

The CF recruiting strategy rests on two pillars. In order to attract this many people to the CF, recruiting officials are calling for an increase in their budget.¹⁰ This money will be spent on a new advertising campaign designed to tell Canadians that "the CF has hung out a 'help wanted' sign."¹¹ The campaign utilizes images of soldiers in the field, sailors in ships at sea, and pilots tearing across the skies; all very traditional and 'gung-ho' aspects of the military. While this imagery may or may not attract interest in the CF, the accuracy of the depiction, and its potential consequences, will be discussed below.

Quality will suffer.

The second pillar is not publicly acknowledged, but has been communicated to the recruiting centres. It involves a 're-evaluation' of recruiting standards in an attempt to 'convert' more of the existing applicants into enrollees. This approach is encapsulated in the comments by Col Gordon Grant, head of the new recruiting strategy. Said he: "The numbers we [the CF] are looking for are so high, its 'Come on in!' We'll welcome them [applicants] with open arms...We're after almost anybody."¹² This welcoming attitude is to be translated into, among other things, adjustments in medical standards and a lowering of requisite scores on aptitude tests.¹³ It has been determined that by reducing the minimum score required to pass the aptitude test by 10%, a further 15% of applicants could be enrolled.¹⁴ These measures send strong signals to everyone — from the private in the field to the junior officers leading them. In essence, they say, "we do not value the standards set for and by you, and more importantly, we do not value you as much as we value new recruits."

The effects of increased recruiting may be detrimental.

Even if the recruiting campaigns were successful in bringing such large numbers of people into the military, it is questionable whether the CF could handle the influx. The rate of intake could be determined by the availability of boots, beds, and bullets with which to train.¹⁵ These logistical hurdles would be augmented by a shortage of instructors available to train the recruits. The fact that units are undermanned due to the staffing shortfalls makes it increasingly difficult for non-commissioned officers (NCOs) and officers to be spared in order to cope with a surge of recruit and basic trades training. These factors will mean that any short-term gains in recruiting may be offset by the

waiting period that results from a shortage of instructors and materiel. And the extra training burden could very well be the final stressor for many of the CF's already overtasked professionals.

The backbone of any modern, volunteer military is its non-commissioned (corporals – warrant officers) and junior/field grade officers (captains and majors). However, when recruiting standards are lowered and the 'floodgates' open, a number of downstream effects will directly impact this group of experienced professionals at the core of the CF. First of all, if the CF is serious about meeting the recruiting targets they have set, they may as well pack up most of their peacekeeping operations, tie up a few more ships and ground any aircraft still flying, because they are going to need every available sergeant, warrant officer and junior officer to man the currently non-existent training establishments. While most service personnel value and cherish opportunities to train others, it is an ancillary duty (contrary to the bureaucratic doublespeak that makes it an overarching priority) and is generally not the main reason they joined the Forces. Therefore the recruiting drive that is underway now will only exacerbate the situation. Captains should forget about taking any courses at the Pearson Peacekeeping Centre, and sergeants would be well advised to re-file their dog-eared memos requesting occupational transfer because the training imperative is about to supercede any personal or professional development plans. They are more likely to finish their second or third tour of the Balkans or the Persian Gulf, and then immediately head off to the Canadian Forces Recruit and Leadership School in St. Jean, Quebec, the Combat Training Centre in Galetown, New Brunswick, or the Fleet Schools in either Victoria or Halifax. After training several classes of new recruits or slightly more advanced trainees, it will be back to the regiment, ship or squadron for yet another operational tour. There will be no time for family, friends or professional/personal development.

Recruits are not the same as captains.

Recruiting does nothing to address the immediate CF-wide deficiencies at the corporal, sergeant, warrant, and junior officer level. These professionals have been in the Forces from anywhere between seven to fifteen years. They are the most up-to-date operators, tacticians and subject matter experts. They are the people Commanding Officers want in

their regiments, crews and squadrons when they deploy. They most likely worked on the last six or seven versions of the ship's combat system software. They took the LAVIII through its operational trials. From a previous patrol, they remember the radar signature of suspicious contacts prowling a restricted area in the northern Arabian Gulf. Yet tragically, and perhaps even criminally, next to nothing has been done to understand why they are leaving in unprecedented and unsustainably high numbers. In conducting our study, we were disappointed but not surprised to find that not a single person had been asked why they were leaving in any structured or laterally consistent way. Indeed, respondents were quite stunned to be asked the question in a survey-format. Responses ranged from disbelief, "I can't believe someone is actually asking my opinion" to gratitude, "I really enjoyed getting that off my chest."

WHY DO PEOPLE LEAVE THE MILITARY?

In examining the current staffing crisis in the CF we decided that we needed to solicit the opinions of people who had taken their release, in order to get some understanding of why they left.¹⁶ Feedback from mainly junior officers released from the regular forces indicates the following:

Pay is not a main reason for leaving. People are realistic in their expectations for remuneration. They see the CF as more than 'just a job' and therefore worth any discount in earnings. However, when the unique aspects of the military way of life are stripped away (adventure, opportunity to lead professionals, responsibility, etc.) that way of life becomes little more than a job. It is at this point that people compare wages and become frustrated. Less than 5% of respondents claimed that pay was the main reason for leaving, and only 29% said it had a significant effect on their decision to leave. Furthermore, while most CF leavers do go on to better paying jobs (61%), this is not always the case. Income after release is pretty evenly split, with 34% of respondents earning the same or less than they did while in the CF. Moreover, the higher salary that some people earn indicates the relative value placed upon the average officer leaving the CF. The idea that money is not a source of dissatisfaction is borne out in the area of benefits. No one listed them as a reason for getting out.

People want good leadership. While

the theory of military leadership holds this as a fundamental truth, our findings indicate that it has been poorly acknowledged in practice. Put simply, if the leadership is poor, people leave the organization.

People want to do what they joined to do. This finding validates CF recruiting policy: people sign up so they can experience all those things that are depicted on recruiting posters. The slogan, 'There's no life like it' is attractive to the kinds of people that join the military. The realities of contemporary military life — namely its bureaucratization — are not the reasons they joined, nor do they motivate people to stay in. Sixty-five percent of recent leavers indicated that a lack of professional opportunities and challenges were either a significant or the main reason for their departure. Junior leaders want responsibility, authority, meaningful training and opportunities for professional and personal development.

CONCLUSIONS AND CAVEATS

It is a truism to say that if the military were able to identify, understand, and correct the problems that plague it, it would become a more efficient organization with a lower rate of attrition. By fixing the things that annoy people to the extent that they leave the CF, the military will solve a whole host of issues — not just personnel shortages. Our findings indicate that most of the irritants that lead to attrition are fundamental to the effective performance of the Forces. For example, a large amount of feedback points to the fact that people want to do what it is they joined up to do; soldiers want to soldier, sailors want to sail, and aviators want to do fly. For quite a few, these activities were all too infrequent, or were conducted at rank levels above or below them when they left the CF.

People are going to leave the CF for a whole host of reasons. The civilian economy will forever offer opportunities that the CF is incapable of providing. However, this cannot mean that the CF should wait around until the next recession before it does anything.¹⁷ The military has always existed in competition with other occupations; the options that exist for CF leavers have always existed and will continue to do so forever. The appropriate response is the development of a robust recruiting and retention program that is dynamic (in that it addresses issues as they arise) but focuses on the long-term (in that it holds certain principles to be constant).

Each and every talented, fully-trained and experienced person that can be convinced and encouraged to remain in the CF equals ten people that need to be attracted, enrolled, and trained. Every possible effort should be made to making the CF the kind of place where this pool of talent wants to remain.

THE WAY AHEAD

In his examination of recruiting in the US forces, David McCormick observed: "Like most large companies, the military faces a war for talent — that is, a battle to recruit and retain officers and enlisted personnel with the intellectual flexibility, technical abilities and communication skills needed today. If it does not fundamentally rethink the way it attracts, develops, and retains people, it will lose this war...The problem is retaining talented mid-level people."¹⁸ Put into this context, it is critical that the CF begin immediately to design, implement, and follow a plan that will achieve success in the short, and long-term. The following recommendations indicate the necessary next steps.

Start working on improving retention now. The idea that the CF can fix the recruiting system first, and then concentrate on retention is ill-conceived. The CF is 'forcing' good people to leave without any idea as to why they are going. Throwing good money at fixing a 'front-door' recruiting problem seems ill-advised if the 'back-door' of retention is fundamentally broken.

Find out what is wrong before trying to fix it. It is critical that the CF and DND leadership comprehend what is contributing to the personnel crisis. In order to do that, old assumptions must be discarded and the voices of those inside the CF (and those who have recently left) must be heard. Exit surveys must be conducted, not by military psychologists or release clerks, but by the chain of command. And the results must be heeded. The leadership must recognize that because of its strong and vibrant culture of loyalty, it is often easier for those outside the military to voice their opinions. Comprehensive, statistically valid research is needed. To that end, an expert panel should be formed, and should include recent leavers representative of all rank levels. This has been recommended by Lewis in the US, and is current practice in DND for issues of gender equality and harassment.¹⁹

Treat the issue holistically and for both the short- and long- terms. Recruiting and retention are two sides of the same coin. There must be a coordinated ap-

proach at the highest levels of ADM – Human Resources (Military) to address them simultaneously. Ideas such as lengthening terms of service, refusing releases, and extending the compulsory retirement age are not effective solutions because they do not address the underlying causes of dissatisfaction.

Think creatively and be prepared to break some rules when trying to improve retention. What is currently in place is not working, so be prepared to think 'outside the box'. In our interviews the ideas of remusters, temporary transfers to the reserves, sabbaticals, periods of reduced pay or leave without pay in order to accomplish other life goals, were all considered as possible redresses to aid in retaining the CF's best. To underline this point, 35% of respondents said that they left the military to pursue educational and training goals they were unable to achieve had they remained in the Forces. Since it is individuals that leave, it will be individuals that need to be convinced to stay. Case-by-case solutions must be included in the host of options if the CF hopes to retain trained people — especially the most talented. Educational and employment policies that stick to notions of 'captains don't do that, only colonels do, so get in line and wait your turn' force high achievers to look elsewhere for challenges and advancement.

Admit that there are leadership problems in the military. Subordinates, regardless of rank, want to be led by people of vision and integrity. No one in uniform wants to be a part of a bureaucracy. Not allowing junior leaders to exercise judgement or make decisions, and surrounding them with micro-management and careerism forces them to reconsider what the CF has to offer.

Spend money on core capabilities, not pay increases. Bread and circuses never fool anybody for long. Money that is spent of getting soldiers into the field, ships away from the jetty, and helicopters in the air will give better returns than well-paid troops sitting around longing for the excitement they joined up to see. Target any kind of pay raise in a manner which retains professionals at the senior NCO and mid-level officer ranks. These people have the skills that are irreplaceable in the short- to medium-term, and represent an investment

of hundreds of thousands of training dollars. Tie pay increases to performance where the best are rewarded and the others have an incentive to improve. **Refrain from recruiting people to a fictional CF.** Flashy ads that portray a military that looks 'cool' may attract people, but they will expect to find those pictures translated into real-life experience soon enough. Otherwise, they will leave at the first available moment. Make the CF and the recruiting poster the same. At the same time, do not lower standards to the point where the new recruits are incapable of performing their duties. Fixing the quantitative axis without controlling the qualitative one will only lead to problems in the medium- to long-term. The CF must also remember whom it is that they are recruiting. For junior officers the CF looks for high achievers, risk-takers, and young adults that have demonstrated academic and extra-curricular prowess. The Regular Officer Training Plan inducts high school student council presidents and the captains of their sports teams, each with a history of community involvement. If someone thrives on challenge, challenge must be available or they will find it somewhere else. In some occupations, the CF provides this challenge in some occupations only early on in a career, where training and employment are tough and exciting. In other occupations, it can take up to seven years before a person is even qualified to fully take on the responsibilities of their trade.

Do not give up. It's war out there — a war for talent. Throwing up one's hands and hoping for a recession is not the answer. The CF recruiting system is predicated on the statement that "the CF offers careers that are among the most interesting and challenging in the country, with opportunities to learn and apply new skills and expertise and to achieve recognition and advancement based on those skills".²⁰ Clearly, the organization has a model on which to build. It should get on with it.

NOTES:

1. "Mothballed military", www.nationalpost.com, 27 January 2001.
2. Internal CF Communications Strategy document, 10 December 2000. Hereafter: Communications Strategy.
3. Tellingly, another set of DND figures suggest the CF is "only" 1,500 people below its 60,000 target.
4. Discussion with DND source, February 2001.

5. Communications Strategy, 10 December 2000.
6. Communications Strategy, 10 December 2000.
7. Discussion with DND source, February 2001.
8. The range in figures relates to the fact that on an 8 year average, enrollments were 2,222 per annum, but on a 3 year average (since the end of planned force reduction) they were 2,466 per annum, according to internal CF data.
9. Official ratios of those attracted to those enrolled is 2:1, but anecdotal evidence from recruiting centres across Canada sets this figure at 3 or 4:1. Communications Strategy, 10 December 2000 and discussions with DND source, February 2001.
10. Reports set the current budget at between \$1.4 million and \$5 million, and the increased levels at anywhere from \$5 million to \$15 million. Jonathan Gatehouse and Stewart Bell, "Military launches image offensive to refill its ranks," www.nationalpost.com, 6 January 2001, and Mike Blanchfield, "Military faces recruitment crisis: official," www.globeandmail.com, 6 January 2001.
11. Communications strategy, 10 December 2000.
12. Gatehouse and Bell, emphasis added.
13. Communications strategy, 10 December 2000.
14. Discussions with DND source, February 2001.
15. This capacity is currently under review by the CF. Communications Strategy, 10 December 2000.
16. Our questionnaire was sent to as many junior officers as possible who had taken their release. Recipients were encouraged to pass it on, and within ten days we had nearly 50 responses. Respondents were asked why they left the CF, what is was about their jobs that attracted them, and what, if anything, the CF could have offered or done in order to encourage them to stay in. Respondents ranged in rank from master corporal up to colonel, from occupations that included air navigator, infantry, maritime engineering, and maritime surface and sub-surface. We recognize that such an approach fails to meet several fundamental requirements, such as a statistically valid sample size. That notwithstanding, the feedback we received does point out some key areas for improvement.
17. Examples of this sentiment can be seen in Blanchfield and Communications Strategy, 10 December 2000.
18. David McCormick, www.NewYorkTimes.com, 10 February 1999. McCormick was a lieutenant in the US Army, served in the Gulf War, and is currently a consultant with McKinsey & Company.
19. The various ministerial advisory boards are an example, as was seeking the consultation of retired captain Sandra Perron on issues of harassment. Also see Lewis.
20. Communication Strategy, 10 December 2000.

The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the CISS or its members.

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